

## ["Jim" Higgins]

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1 Conn. 1938-9 [Hig?]

"Jim" Higgins:

"Well sir, was that newspaper piece I give you any good? I had quite a bit of that stuff around one time, every time I'd see anything in the paper about knife shops I used to cut it out and save it, but I ain't been able to find anything else. Mislaide it or threw it away, I suppose. You know how it is with that kind of junk, you think you'll keep it to read over some time, and afterwards you can't understand what the hell you saved it for.

"I had quite a lot of stuff on Northfield, I remember. Stuff old man Catlin used to write for the papers and other people up there. Northfield was a great little place for people writin' for the papers. They got more historians to the square foot up there than a dozen colleges. Awful proud of the village. Of course that stuff that Catlin wrote didn't say much about the strike, or about the bad feelin' there was between the knifemakers and the Catlin family. Naturally, he wouldn't write anything bad about his own family, but where that strike was concerned, there wasn't much good you could say about 'em.

"They were tryin' to cut the help when all the other knife shops were givin' raises, and that's what started the whole thing. And then to put the finishin' touch on it, they go and bring these knifemakers in from England 2 to be strikebreakers, without tellin' them what it was all about. Well, that was where they outsmarted themselves, because not only the fellas refused to go to work when they found out there was a strike, but the government called the Catlins up on the carpet for importin' labor against the United States law.

"I suppose you got a lot of information on that strike, didn't you? Any of them old-timers could tell you up there, Henry Gill or some of them fellas. That Catlin family, from everyting

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I ever heard about 'em, were a pretty shrewd bunch of Yankees, but even so, they weren't quite smart enough in the end. The business kind of fell away from under 'em. They bought the old American Knife shop down at the Bridge, and all the company houses along with it. Twenty-eight of them. But they never made anything an the factory, even though I heard they only paid twelve thousand dollars for the whole shebang, houses and all. They had two-three fellas workin' in the factory, towards the last, just so's the insurance wouldn't be too high, but they were losin' money right along. I guess they still own the houses, the Catlins do, but hell they don't make nothin' on them, either. Eight and ten dollars a month rent that's all they get for 'em.

“And that old shop down there—you seen it, have you? It's a shame the way it's fallin' apart. Fella made tin 3 cans there for a while, just after the war, but he couldn't make a go of it, and they ain't done a thing there since. Fine place to work one time. Hell of a difference between gettin' a job now'days and when I was a youngster. I remember goin' to work down to the Bridge, I met Ed Kilmer on the street one day and he says, ‘You doin' anything?’ I was workin' down in Waterville but I wasn't makin' much. I told him, and he says, ‘Come in Monday mornin', if you want to,’ he says, ‘you can make a pretty good day's pay down here.’ And that's all there was to it.

“Well, a fella up the street here always got a job in the clock shop this week. He was tellin' me, he says, first off he had to see this fella Perley, the personnel manager, and answer a lot of damn fool questions. Then he had to sign about a million papers. They he had to go to Doc Wight's office for an examination—physical examination—and Doc said he had flat feet and so he was liable to rupture easy, and so they sent him to Waterbury, he had to go see the compensation commissioner and waive compensation and so on and so forth, and he said by the time he got through he was so goddamn tired he didn't feel like goin' to work. They're pretty strict with their tests, they tell me. They give a fella a hell of an examination. If they have any accidents, insurance goes up, you know, and they don't want that.

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"Prouder's hell of that accident free record. Cap flew off of an automatic machine and hit a fella on the head the other day, and they rushed him down to the nurse and found out 4 he was all right, it only grazed him, didn't even raise a lump, and they sent him back to the job. It only took about five minutes, so they figgered he didn't lost any time from his work. And it don't show up on their record, you see. Every time they work so many hundred thousand hours without an accident that causes loss of time, they let the whole shop go home an hour early and pay 'em for it. Gives 'em something to work for, they figger.

"Well, that's okay. But I spent a good many years in the knife business and that was about as tough as any one of them for accidents, and I never see any real bad ones. I see a grindin' wheel come apart one day and it flew all over hell, but nobody got hurt very bad. A coupla fellas got hit with small pieces, but they laughed it off. They were pretty careful, as a rule, around machinery, and there wasn't as much of it as there is these days. Most of what they got now is supposed to be fool proof, but somehow they'll find a way to get hurt, some of these boneheads. Fella took the guard off one of the presses here a few weeks ago and in about five minutes afterwards he lost a finger. What good's fool proof machinery with fellas like that?"